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# The Southern Speech Journal

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## OLD MYTHS AND NEW REALITIES: AN ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS

JAMES E. POPOVICH

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AS SOUTHERNERS AND AS SPEECH EDUCATORS we take pride in this, the thirty-sixth annual convention of the Southern Speech Association. This association was begun by southerners in the dark days of 1930, an era of economic want, an era of racial and religious discrimination, an era of faltering and unstable academic institutions at all levels of education.

Thirty-six years have intervened since then—a period marked by wars, economic recessions, vast educational improvements, the advance of mass-communications technology, the increase and the decline of political intervention in education, and a real examination of racial, religious, and nationality differences. During these years there has been a resurgence and decline of organizations devoted to the biases of human nature. We have been a part of an era marked by Ku Klux Klan activity, by White Citizens Councils, by the strengthening of opposing political parties. We have noted the discovery of the South by industrialists of the North, we have witnessed a gradual emigration of southern whites and Negroes to other sections of our country, and we have seen the immigration of middle-westerners and easterners as well as new Americans from the Latin countries of our hemisphere.

Of all these vast, interrelated, and significant changes the most pertinent has been the evolving commitment by southerners to public education. We are still in the midst of this titanic evolution.

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We have seen as recently as yesterday's headlines the proposal that legislation be enacted in several southern states to shift the emphasis of the Head Start programs, which presently serve only the children of economically deprived families. The new emphasis would make possible (in those states adopting it) free public-school experience for children currently thought of as *pre-schoolers*.

Vast changes also have already been wrought at the secondary-school level. Thanks in large measure to federal grants and aids, the public senior high schools of the South bear little resemblance to their counterpart of the 1920's. With few exceptions public junior colleges did not exist in the southern states. Today there are ninety-two public junior colleges in our twelve southern states. The growth of public colleges and universities in the South is even more dramatic. In the 1920's only a handful of universities provided rich experiences for the scholarly, and nearly all of these were private universities. Today as southerners we take pride in the tremendous growth of such centers of scholarship as the University of Texas, the University of North Carolina, the University of Virginia, the University of Georgia, the University of Florida, Florida State University, the University of Tennessee, Louisiana State University, the University of Kentucky. And we note with barely concealed pride the emerging institutions of real potential: L.S.U. at New Orleans, Memphis State University, the University of Alabama at Mobile, the University of Richmond, the University of Houston, and the University of South Florida. We take continuing pride in those private universities which were often in the vanguard of such progress: Tulane, Vanderbilt, Emory, Rice, Southern Methodist, Duke, and others.

Such an evolution of commitment to southern education—and particularly to southern higher education—by southern taxpayers and southern politicians deserves and merits close scrutiny. Most taxpayers are somewhat easily won to the conviction that public monies spent on education are monies well spent. And politicians are easily persuaded, even if they are not personally convinced, that if taxpayers believe this to be so, then their job is to make it so. So we southerners, as we drive over our new roads and interstate highways, see ample evidence of the vast investment of public funds in education. Handsome, attractive school buildings are in evidence everywhere in the South. Soon our memories of the dreary, inadequate, unpainted, small school buildings of another era will fade.

And we will become—if, in fact, we have not already become—lulled by the vision of handsome buildings.

Bricks and mortar do not make a school. They make for an attractive school *building*, but they do not make a *school*. The essence of a school is the quality of the instruction. It emanates from the training and the character of the teacher. Pleasant school surroundings, varied audio-visual aids, efficient secretarial and administrative staffs—all these *help*, but they are peripheral to the central process of teaching and learning.

These facts, of course, we know and believe. But how often we educators salve our consciences with mere general declarations of intent! How often do we translate these declarations into explicit and meaningful action?

#### TOWARD GOOD TEACHING

In the last thirty years some definite steps have been taken to ensure good teaching. Southern state boards of education have increased teacher-training requirements. More credits and courses are required of potential teachers in content and substantive areas of learning, a bachelor's degree is almost *de rigueur* for certification and for employment, and periodic enrollment in courses is necessary for certificate renewal and salary increments in nearly every southern state.

At the college and university level, the doctorate is considered the terminal degree in all but a handful of academic areas. In most universities evidence of postdoctoral work, publishing, and/or research is required for tenure, promotions, and salary increases.

These are all *tangible* and *explicit* efforts to improve teaching effectiveness. On the whole they are measurable and, therefore, utilized as indicators of a teacher's value to an institution. We support many of these; we recognize the problems of assigning too much or too little significance to them. But, in general, we accept them.

I wonder if we who are in the profession of educating students in the arts and sciences of oral communication should accept attractive buildings and measurably trained teachers as adequate to the task of teaching. Please note that I did not say "adequate to the task of teaching *speech*." I said "adequate to the task of *teaching*."

The teacher plays a vital role in our society. The evolution of a human being into one who can teach is at best an infinitely complex undertaking. To term this process "training" is an insult both to the process and to the individual. It implies a kind of docility on the part of the individual similar to that of Pavlov's dog. Animals can be trained; a human being who can be trained has limited value in the teaching profession. If one had to select the single learning experience that is most significant in the evolution of a teacher, it would be in the area of communication. And it would involve the four communicative acts based on the processes of scrutiny, distillation, crystallization, and reflection. Other experiences, of course, are significant—immersion in the facts and artifacts of one's particular academic discipline—but the central experience should be one of *thought* and *expression*.

Do we, as speech educators, carefully design for our students experiences that have *thought* and *expression* as their central function? In all the specialties of the oral-communication discipline we are concerned with *process* and *product*. We have within the many subspecialties of our discipline the content, the philosophies, and the techniques for assuring *process* and ascertaining *product*. Yet, as one looks at the South, yesterday, and today, one becomes painfully aware of the failure of the speech profession to meet its central obligations. This failure can be attributed to the discipline itself and to the individuals in the discipline, be they teachers or learners.

Oh, we do very well at teaching students to make articulate sounds, to perform vocally and physically, and to acquire expertness in the handling of a variety of the mechanistic elements of our discipline—tape recorders, electrolecterns, sound booms, lighting instruments, spectrographs, cameras, dollies, buzz saws, computers, et cetera. A competent individual in his specialty (student or teacher) must, of course, possess this expertise. But an eminently qualified individual is one who possesses more than mechanistic skills; he must possess insight into the *process* and must be able to discriminate clearly the cogent factors of the process so that, by varying any of the factors of the phenomena, he can change, modify, adapt, or restructure the elements of the process and/or the elements of the product.

## OUR BIFOCALATED WORLD

People in our profession should be able to inspire students beyond the techniques of improving a child's articulatory disorders, of "putting on a play," of theorizing emptily about television audiences, of getting students to read aloud clearly, of providing futile opportunities for forensic activities without an audience and a qualified critic. Speech educators should do much more. Occasionally they do. But the evidence reveals—at least in the South—that speech educators for a long time have skirted the central and enduring questions. In our teaching and in the experiences we have designed for our students we have too often played it safe. Because of our strange bifocalated world we have ignored nagging problems that long ago should have absorbed us and our students. Problems in the South have been complex and have existed for more decades than they should have. But until the Head Start programs were inaugurated, the white speech educator was not involved in the oral-language problems of deprived children, white or Negro. Until recent federal-court orders whites, Negroes, and, in some cases, Indians and orientals could not attend classes together without any real demurring on the part of southern communication educators. Even today no southern public university undertakes to present plays or oral-interpretation performances that scrutinize our basic problems. Until 1960 members of a southern religious denomination revealed publicly their conviction that a Roman Catholic could not possibly be an acceptable President of the United States. The number of Jews, Roman Catholics, and nonwhites, non-Anglo-Saxons, and non-Protestants elected to public office in the entire South was and is incredibly small. In school system after school system there was a shortage of Negro speech therapists because no training centers were available to Negroes. Yet the speech profession made no concerted effort to publicize the problem. As a matter of fact most of the speech clinics in the South would not accept for therapy any nonwhite children who had communication disorders.

This is a part of our history. We must face it and live with it. We made *some* attempts to clarify our stand and to satisfy our consciences. In 1956 we made our association open to *any* qualified members, and we announced that we would no longer meet in any city or at any hotel that discriminated in any way against any of our members. The declaration was noble, but it would have meant

more if it had been promulgated two years *before*, not two years *after*, the Supreme Court rendered its decision about segregation and education. And our declaration would have meant more if we had scrupulously observed it.

#### ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE SOUTH

These and others are ancient wounds, and you might rightly ask, "What advantage is there to our association to dredge up these unpleasantnesses of the past?" We southerners, in our ancient code of unfailing courtesy and charm, have always chosen to ignore the realities our past has to teach us. Today, despite the commitment of southern taxpayers and political leaders, despite our shiny new school buildings, despite our better-trained teachers, the struggle for the development of sturdy, informed, perceiving young southerners is as great as ever. Studies that have been made concerning academic freedom in the South today reveal the ancient and troubling problems of a bifocalated society. One excellent article (by William Fidler in the Winter 1965 edition of the *AAUP Bulletin*) details the problems of tenured and nontenured faculty members, the dismissals of nonconformists, the restraints upon choice of textbooks, research, and publications.

Other evidence abounds. Remember the problems of North Carolina and its speaker-ban law. (In this connection it should be pointed out that Ohio State University, faced with the same problem as confronted one of the universities in North Carolina, took vastly different steps in meeting the issue of academic freedom for the university community.) Would that all southern boards of education, trustees, and regents would heed the words of Dr. Frank Graham, a former president of the University of North Carolina and a former United States Senator, when he said: "Surely the trustees are not afraid of the effect on students in free open forums from hearing all points of view in the course of the year. . . . Freedom has risks, but the risks of a closed society are far greater than the risks of an open society."

The newspapers have recently noted the presence of Robert Kennedy on the campuses of the University of Mississippi and the University of Alabama. One can imagine the usual shudderings by politicians and would-be educators at the thought of having as a



speaker a man who had single-handedly carried out decisions of the federal government which were antithetical to those of the governments of those states. It would have reflected well upon the speech profession if the state speech associations, the departments of speech, or the forensics clubs had invited Mr. Kennedy. But the papers noted that Mr. Kennedy was invited by the University of Mississippi's Law School's Speaker's Bureau. It was interesting to note that this bureau had also invited the Imperial Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. I believe that the University of Mississippi and particularly its Law School's Speaker's Bureau should be commended for their determination to hear such differing points of view.

This is the ancient and specific task of education: the posing of problems, the examination of information and evidence, and the scrutiny of conflicting testimony. In one sense Senator William Fulbright has extended his old classroom at the University of Arkansas to include all Americans to participate in the ancient and enriching experience of seeking knowledge and examining hasty or ill-defined conclusions. Whether we agree or disagree with the agonizing decisions about Viet Nam, Americans must pursue openly and unflinchingly this inquiry. It is our job, as authorities in the process of communication, to counter the thrusts of those who deride and denigrate the efforts of the senators and these hearings. So too should we carefully explain to our students the purpose of Mrs. Susan Epperson's litigation. Mrs. Epperson, you'll recall, is challenging in Arkansas courts the constitutionality of state laws against teaching evolution. The Arkansas Education Association should be commended for its role in the case.

This struggle for freedom of inquiry is an ancient one. Down through history, poets, playwrights, and speakers have enunciated the right of human beings to pursue truth. Isocrates, Aristotle, Socrates, as well as the ancient Greek playwrights, were the first to articulate these rights. John Milton, in his famous *Areopagitica*, protesting "the encumbrances and the restraints" placed on communication by Parliament, paid tribute to Isocrates by naming the essay after one of Isocrates'. European history is filled with noble declarations and deeds of men like Galileo, Luther, and other dissenters, particularly those during the era of dictators.

We have observed these struggles in our own history—Peter Zenger, Patrick Henry and the members of the Continental Con-

gress, the senators cited in Kennedy's *Profiles of Courage*, Sacco and Vanzetti, and many others. The cry against them in our country, has always included the labels of "traitor" or "un-American." We lived through the hideousness of the Dies Committee investigations and the incredible excesses of the McCarthy era. Yet, strangely, these objections are most viciously directed against teachers who seek to aid students in exploring controversial issues. These imprecations include the usual charge of un-Americanism but also center on what the accusers believe to be the main function of the educator. These objectors want educators to create for their students a world of learning which is safely immune from the pressures of the world and of the enormous magnitude of the problems that inhabit the world. It is almost as if they believe all students to be naïvely unaware of these forces, as if all the mass media do not regularly report these problems, and as if the world, in a sense, should be forever caught in an Alice-in-Wonderland hypnotic trance, where all children are forever good, forever simple, forever naïve.

However well-intentioned such people may be, they do not comprehend the rightful duties of the teacher. Nor do they understand the present realities of the character of the learner and his cognizance of the world about him. Today's southern students are infinitely more sophisticated than they were a generation ago. Because of the effect of mass-communication media, the mobility of our citizens, and the urbanization of our region, these young southerners represent a stimulating challenge to southern educators.

The old concept of teachers—that of *in loco parentis*—is not applicable to today's youth. Young southerners are not seeking parent substitutes; they are on the threshold of a new and wonderful moment in self-realization. They look to educators, particularly to those at the university level, to throw open wide the doors to learning as well as to teach them the processes of developing new attitudes toward old problems. Our job is not to teach solutions any more than it is to teach mere skills. Our job is to help create a genuine climate for learning. And this can come about only when a free society is actually free. The restraints of censorship, real or implicit, make impossible true teaching or true learning.

Our task as speech educators is to articulate strongly the need for full freedom of inquiry and then, *by our acts*, endorse these declarations. We cannot, as we have in the past, hide from this

responsibility. We have, in a sense, once failed. We now have, fortunately, a second chance. With the gigantic struggles our country and our civilization face, can we, as southerners, take refuge in the superficialities of excellence—school buildings, financial aids, “trained” teachers? Must we not, as southerners and specialists in the arts and sciences of oral communication, demonstrate that the examined life is the only one worth living?

### PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE, 1953

A young vigorous organization looks forward to shining goals and moves emphatically toward them. As maturity sets in, there arises a tendency to look back to early struggles and early conquests. As long as a balance is held between pride in the past and action in the present and a sense of direction to new goals in the future—as long as there is no romanticizing of the past that paralyzes action toward a greater future—just so long will that organization flourish and progress. Like the ancient Janus, it must at once look backward and ahead.

The Southern Speech Association has enjoyed a vigorous youth. Now, in its strong maturity, it continues, among other ways, to plan for the present and future by providing for a study of its structure and its objectives that it may gain the greatest strength and best direction. At the same time, it is looking back to its past to record in permanent form the annals of its beginning and its accomplishments.

Charles Munro Getchell,

*Southern Speech Journal*, XIX (September, 1953).